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C O N F I D E N T I A L AMMAN 004744

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL KPAL IS JO

SUBJECT: MEETING WITH STEAMED FORMER PRIME MINISTER TAHIR AL-MASRI

Classified By: AMBASSADOR EDWARD W. GNEHM FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a meeting with former Prime Minister Tahir al-Masri on August 18, a visibly angry al-Masri complained about the recent U.S. treatment of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and encouraged the U.S.--before any movement against Iraq--to pressure the Israelis to withdraw from Areas A and improve the humanitarian situation on the ground for the Palestinians. We report al-Masri's comments as illustrative of an emerging theme in Jordan -- that the U.S. is "targeting a number of Arab countries with large populations or economic importance," in the words of one editorial. End Summary.

WHY ARE YOU ATTACKING YOUR ALLIES?

¶2. (C) Al-Masri started the meeting by asking Poloff why the U.S. is attacking two of its closest allies--Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Al-Masri pointed to two recent issues that have made the press here--the lawsuit launched against several Saudi NGOs and members of the Royal family, and the U.S. decision not to request supplemental funds for Egypt because of the case of human rights activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim. Al-Masri refused to believe Poloff's explanation that the USG had no control over the civil lawsuit launched by private Amcits, saying that the USG could have done something for the Saudis. As further evidence of hostile U.S. intentions towards Saudi Arabia, he showed Poloff a Salon.com article which portrays the administration as only slightly less antagonistic towards Saudi Arabia than Iraq. On the Saad Eddin Ibrahim issue, al-Masri complained that the U.S. is putting both countries in a terrible position vis a vis Iraq and the Palestinian situation.

PALESTINE: PLEASE DO SOMETHING BEFORE YOU HIT IRAQ

¶3. (C) Al-Masri calmed down a bit to talk about the issue of Iraq. Al-Masri told Poloff he was convinced that the U.S. intends to launch an attack--it was a question of when, not if. Al-Masri suggested that to temper the reaction in Jordan to U.S. military action, the U.S. should pressure the Israelis to withdraw from Area A and improve the humanitarian situation on the ground in the West Bank (i.e. lift the curfew). Al-Masri predicted that by doing so, "it will be much easier for the U.S. to go after Iraq."

¶4. (C) Al-Masri became riled again discussing the deteriorating situation in the West Bank, particularly the declining living conditions which were "taking a terrible toll on everyone." He reiterated his support for the President's June 24 speech, but doubted Sharon's commitment to the President's goal of a two-state solution and believed Sharon was doing all he could to undermine the peace effort. Since the speech, according to al-Masri, "the Palestinians have done everything the U.S. has asked of them...but each time Sharon says no." Al-Masri commented that Palestinian Jordanians were seething about recent Israeli actions in the West Bank, but had no outlet to express their emotions.

COMMENT

¶5. (C) Al-Masri, who is often acerbic but seldom emotional, was striking a theme which we are hearing in the press and from a variety of sources -- that the U.S. is "targeting" a number of Arab countries, including allies like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, as part of a strategy for the region. In the words of an editorial in "Dustour," "All this means...a serious negative turning point in the course of Arab-American relations, especially in the Arab countries that are classified as allies of the United States...The only beneficiary" is Israel, which supposedly is encouraging an attack on Iraq and "instigating" the U.S. against Egypt and Saudi Arabia. To some degree, this perspective is simply a variant on the widespread perception that the U.S. has a fundamentally anti-Arab bias in policy. To the extent,

however, that Jordanians come to believe that the U.S. is dismissive even of its friends in the Arab world, American credibility suffers across the board.

GNEHM